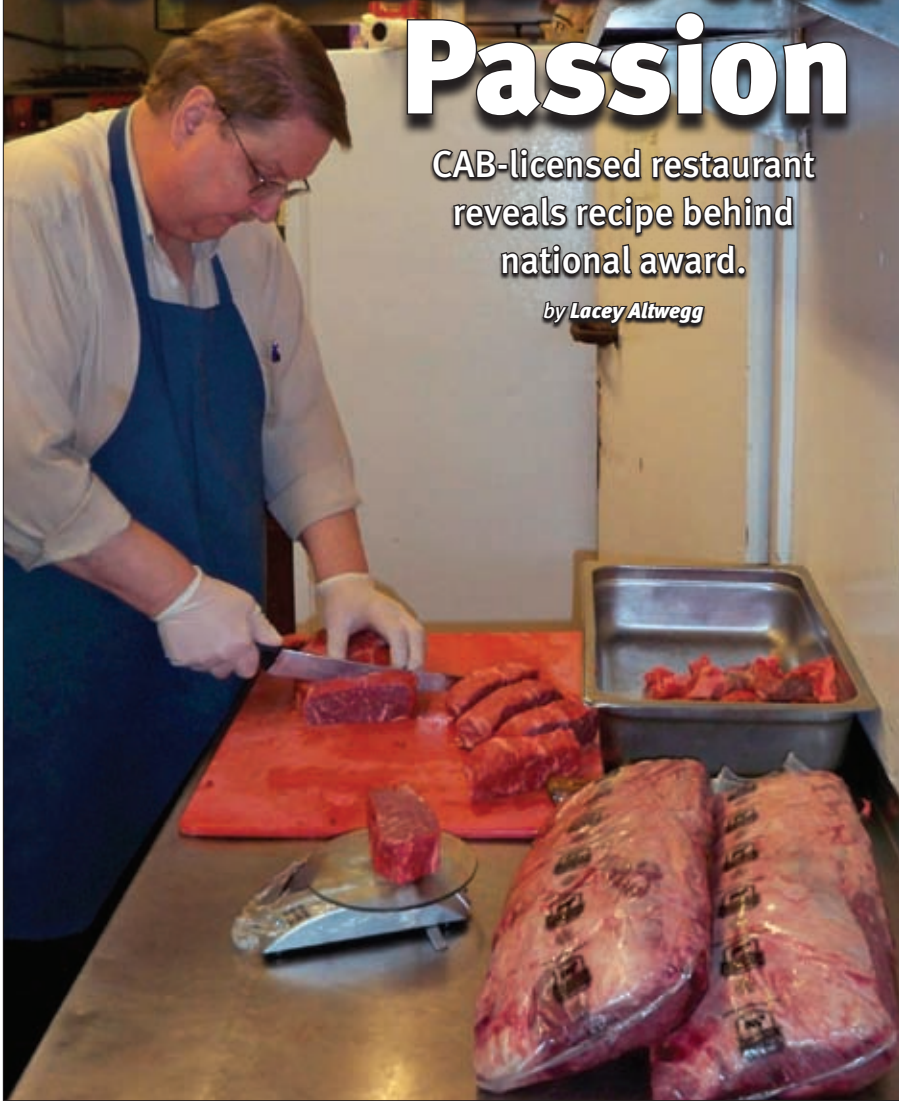


# Come Taste the Passion

CAB-licensed restaurant reveals recipe behind national award.

by Lacey Altwegg



**M**ixing integrity, passion and service together created a recipe for success for one Nebraska restaurant. Uncle Ed's Steakhouse in Grand Island, a Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) licensee, recently won the 2009 Independent Restaurant National Beef Backer Award. Ed Sabatka, otherwise known as Uncle Ed, says the steak house is "a dream come true," and the recognition is nice, too.

"This award is a validation of everything we have been doing in our restaurant for the past 16 years," Sabatka says. "We are what the consumer is after, which is a superior product."

The Beef Checkoff Program's foodservice Beef Backer Awards go to

independent and chain restaurants that promote beef and the beef industry through innovative menuing, promotions and delicious beef entrées that draw customers back time after time.

What started as a hobby turned into a booming business for Sabatka and his wife, Anita. It began as Uncle Ed's Barbecue catering service in 1994, named by his 4-year-old nieces. The avocation complemented Sabatka's profession as a feedlot nutritionist. After 20 years of being on the road and working in the cattle industry, his passions converged into a new reality.

"I kept a notepad in my truck for ideas about formulating a restaurant," Sabatka says. "My nutrition consulting was a business

passion, but my heart passion has always been cooking and owning a restaurant."

The opportunity to rent a small building in Broken Bow, Neb., arose, and it was there that Uncle Ed's Steakhouse first made its mark.

After seven years, the business moved to Nebraska's "Third City" to exploit a bigger market.

"We felt we had a better restaurant, and we needed to get where there were more people so we could sell more steaks," Sabatka says. "Before long, we took over the top restaurant spot in Grand Island."

## Taking it to the next level

In 2008, the Sabatkas' restaurant was runner-up in the state Beef Backer contest. Unsatisfied with the ranking, "Uncle Ed" decided to up his ante.

"I knew we were better than that, so I contacted the Nebraska Beef Council, and we put together more steak promotions and featured *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) products and recipes," Sabatka says.

He explored all avenues of advertising. "My live cooking radio show served as a way to promote high-quality beef, and 60% of the time I would promote my CAB products."

An 11-year CAB licensee, Sabatka has worked with CAB products, particularly steaks, since his catering days. "We would cater bull sales, and people just couldn't get over the amazing taste of our steaks," he says. Sabatka says he knows how to handle a higher-grade product.

"After working with mainly Angus cattle producers for 20 years, licensing with CAB was just natural. I already understood the carcass data and the components of meat," he says. "I have never used anything but CAB, and I never will. Price takes care of itself if quality is there."

Sabatka is the head chef in his restaurant and says he didn't learn how to cook the "normal" way. "I never went to culinary school, but learned how to cook from chefs I hired for my restaurant and by reading cooking books."

The steak house's menu showcases his love for beef, as steak is his most popular entrée. "I select all my foods based on quality," Sabatka says. "There aren't any slacker entrées on my menu, but my steak is the star; it's why our restaurant has the reputation it does."

The owner-chef spends countless hours in the kitchen perfecting his product with a process based on meat science. "I work on my line every night; I don't tolerate any black on my steaks," he says. "We turn our steaks every 30 seconds to a minute, for warming and for the natural sugars to caramelize. They are just beautiful."

He adds, "Dedication to beef aging and

► **Above:** "Price takes care of itself if quality is there," says Ed Sabatka, owner of Uncle Ed's Steakhouse in Grand Island, Neb. The CAB-licensed restaurant recently won the 2009 Independent Restaurant National Beef Backer Award.

attention to preparation make our steaks truly exceptional. Our high standards of quality ensure a mouthwatering, exciting and satisfying beef experience.”

### **Helping hands**

Helping Sabatka run the restaurant, wife Anita handles the office work, waitress training and other aspects of the business. “Without my wife, this business would not be successful. We make business decisions together — but only if I agree with them,” Sabatka laughs.

Besides friendly service and great food, Sabatka says his waitresses serve information.

They are trained to understand the CAB products served so they can answer customer questions.

“Eating at my restaurant is a memorable experience,” he says. “It is not about just coming in and eating the food. It’s about how the food makes you feel after you leave, and believe me, our customers leave here feeling very happy.”

To be able to satisfy those customers with high-quality beef, Sabatka realizes the ranching roots of Angus cattlemen. “Just like me, producers have a passion for what they do, and every time I sell a steak, I am representing them and their hard work,” he

says. “I fly their flag on a daily basis, and I have flown CAB’s flag for a long time — and I love doing so. It’s a win-win situation.”

What is the Nebraska and reigning National Beef Backer Award winner’s next goal? Having given it at least some thought, Sabatka says, “maybe another location.”

There are no plans to change the recipe for success, though he might share it.

“I don’t know if we ever need to have a four- or five-star status, but we will continue representing a quality, superior product and maybe at some point teach other people how to increase their quality experience.”

